Toward a Dynamic Narrative of Return in Complex Conflict Environments

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Conflicts rarely occur in isolation. They have compounding effects and often spill over into neighboring regions. Yet, return and repatriation programs in complex conflict contexts continue to rely on templates rooted in a nation-state container logic, where refugee return is conceptualized as a linear movement from a host country to a country of origin. This framing fails to account for the fact that decisions around voluntary return unfold within broader ecosystems of (im)mobility, uncertainty, and elliptical displacement. Rather than representing simple transitions from country A to country B, these movements are shaped by multi-layered constraints and shifting conditions. This piece sets out to conceptualize refugee return policymaking as part of a broader ecosystem that accounts for a holistic approach to peacebuilding. The case of refugee returns from Lebanon to Syria offers critical insights for peacebuilders and humanitarian organizations seeking to develop recovery and repatriation programs.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) frames voluntary return as the preferred outcome among the three durable solutions for refugees, alongside local integration and resettlement to third countries. According to UNHCR, refugees themselves as well as the international community view this solution as the most desirable. However, in complex environments where cascading conflicts compound each other, cut across borders, and intersect with socio-economic inequities, environmental disasters, and chronic crises, how should we understand voluntariness in return? At what stage of the conflict can return be considered *voluntary*, and do returns necessarily imply a linear movement from the host country back to the country of origin?

The return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria raises critical questions. In June 2025, the Lebanese government added the finishing touches on a repatriation plan for Syrians to return to their country of origin, following the regime change in Syria and the gradual lifting of international sanctions. This development presents a myriad of conundrums for peacebuilding and humanitarian organizations, which must now position themselves in relation to such a plan—particularly in a context where both neighboring countries remain entangled in overlapping and chronic crises. Lebanon has hosted more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees since the onset of mass displacement from Syria. Refugee returns have been on Lebanese politicians' mind as soon as the regime started reconquering large swathes of land as early as 2016, and before its ultimate defeat.

In December 2024, the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime marked a turning point. Syrians expressed euphoria at the dawn of what was perceived as a transformative era. Many signaled their readiness to return and to engage, in one way or another, in the reconstruction of their homeland. Refugee-led organizations based in Lebanon also framed this moment as a unique opportunity to shape Syria's post-war transition by gauging public sentiment on the new constitution and by facilitating dialogue and reconciliation in a deeply divided society. While various grassroots actors perceived the fall of the regime as a window of opportunity to shape the transition after decades of repression, governments hurried to link the debate on the collapse of the authoritarian regime with refugees' return. States that have hosted Syrian refugees, such as EU member states, perceived the fall of the regime as a window of opportunity to place the issue of returns at the forefront of the policy agenda.

In Lebanon, the regime change in Syria triggered several significant developments. One of them was a loosening of Syrian influence over political nominations in Beirut. In January 2025, the election of President Joseph Aoun and the

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appointment of Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister ignited hopes for a new political era and for the restoration of Lebanon's long-eroded sovereignty. For decades, the country had operated under the shadow of Syrian tutelage. Indeed, despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005, pro-Syrian coalitions within Lebanon's governing elite cartels continued to ensure that Lebanese politics remained tightly intertwined with the geopolitical exigencies of its neighbor.

With the formation of the new government, Lebanese officials expressed a clear intention to recalibrate political ties with Damascus in light of Syria's leadership transition. Simultaneously, they viewed the shift as an opening to revive discussions around the return of Syrian refugees. Numerous political statements reflect this dual approach—linking the Syrian regime change to a new phase in bilateral relations and renewed momentum on refugee coordination. As the Access Center for Human Rights reports, on February 8, 2025, Lebanon's Minister of Social Affairs Hanin al-Sayed argued that "building good relations with Damascus" would facilitate "the safe return of Syrian refugees.

Three days later, on February 11, in his first televised speech, the newly appointed Prime Minister Nawaf Salam prioritized two strategic policy issues that would recalibrate Syrian Lebanese relations: The demarcation of borders and the return of Syrian refugees. Against this backdrop, he advocated for a concerted return plan with international actors that would account for Syria's new geopolitical realities. The following day, upon his meeting with Portuguese policymakers, the newly elected President Joseph Aoun called on EU countries to "press for the return of the refugees to their countries, not for their continued stay in Lebanon."

While Lebanese politicians have repeatedly emphasized that the time is opportune for the return of Syrian refugees, and have urged donor countries to tie funding to repatriation rather than integration, critical questions persist. First, to what extent, and if so, how can international actors assess the readiness of Syrian refugees to return after years of protracted displacement in Lebanon? Second, how can Lebanese authorities manage these returns in a manner that upholds a rights-based, protection-centered framework, while ensuring coordination with international entities such as the UNHCR? Third, in light of the ongoing violence in Syria and Lebanon's continued reception of new arrivals from the country, how realistic is it for the Lebanese government to implement and sustain a formal return plan?

The truth is that the refugee return policy field from Lebanon to Syria is extremely complex. First, voluntary refugee returns are not merely the outcome of elite 'speech acts' or high-level decisions orchestrated by governments in coordination with international and domestic actors. Instead, they are situated within complex, cross-border conflict and policy arenas.

While some studies on returns from Lebanon to Syria privilege either a research lens centered on either push factors in the host country or pull factors in the homeland, scholars have also advocated for a transnational field approach—one that analyzes Lebanon and Syria as an interconnected, cross-border nexus of power, conflict, and institutional linkages. Volatile policy cycles, shifting agendas, and enduring uncertainty have cascaded across national boundaries. Against this backdrop, return policy frameworks should transcend the confines of a nation-state framework, embracing complexity and holistic approaches in their design.

In recent months, recurring unrest, cycles of violence, and brief interludes of fragile trucein both Lebanon and Syria have made it exceedingly difficult for refugees to make informed and voluntary decisions about whether to stay in Lebanon or return to Syria. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam affirmed that the new Lebanese government would seek to initiate a comprehensive dialogue with Syria—focused on delineating borders and ensuring mutual non-interference in domestic affairs. He further stated that the continued presence of Syrian refugees must be linked to a clear plan for return. In reality, however, both countries remain far from establishing a coherent political dialogue on key issues such as border demarcation, neutrality, and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs.

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees have been caught in back-to-back conflict cycles. In recent years, they have navigated an environment that severely limited their ability to make both final and voluntary decisions about return. Cascading crises and wars from the Beirut port explosion to the all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel have hampered their capacity to make informed decisions. Many have returned to Syria to re-return to Lebanon. Many have stayed in Lebanon, brooding on the possibility of return. As the 2025 UNHCR Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees'

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Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria shows, 60 percent of the Syrians who were interviewed "would prefer to visit Syria before making a decision to return."

In Syria, at the national level, post-Asad policy reform processes, including deliberations over constitutional reform, the formation of new political institutions, and post-war state-building, have begun. Yet these processes have left many constituencies feeling sidelined and dissatisfied. At the same time, at the local level, dialogue processes within cities and villages—where identity politics, reconciliation, and state-building remain deeply contested—are yet to gain ground.

Some international policy discussions have thus far prioritized an infrastructural and economic conception of reconstruction and recovery in Syria. While this emphasis is undoubtedly important, it remains debatable to what extent such efforts (including recent plans to rebuild the port of Tartus) fully account for the micro-level, social, and everyday dimensions of recovery. This raises the question of how stakeholders at the forefront of such programs can ensure that Syria's post-conflict transition does not devolve into a collection of misaligned processes.Indeed, research on war-to-peace transitions highlights the difficulties of aligning and sequencing the multifaceted aspects of transition processes from security to transitional justice. To anchor the peace, research further highlights the importance of engaging diverse grassroots and civil actors from the outset and at every stage of the process.

In this context, for a grassroots conception of voluntary return to take root, it is essential that refugees cultivate trust in 'post-conflict Syria' as a viable pathway toward a people-centered vision of social and economic prosperity. Since refugees ultimately return not merely to a state but to a 'place-making' project, the prospect of a voluntary, safe, and dignified return remains profoundly uncertain.

When considering prospects for refugee return from Lebanon to Syria, the peacebuilding community is called to explore the complex interconnections between conflict dynamics, refugees' vulnerabilities and aspirations, and the repatriation policy process through a multifaceted, ecosystem-based lens. In conflict landscapes such as the Lebanese Syrian field, turning points (whether defined as the outbreak of war, a shift in leadership, or the collapse of a system) rarely occur in isolation. They intersect with various security, economic and policy issues that cut across frontiers. One crisis magnifies another, leading to complex feedback loops that disrupt individuals' decision-making capacity. In this context, refugees' return intentions are far from linear: They do not follow a straightforward A-to-B trajectory, nor do they represent a calculated shift from a less desirable to a more desirable setting.

As various strands of research have shown, return decisions hinge on refugees' subjective and shifting practices of place-making. These practices often transcend the territorial trap of return. Indeed, the notion of return may extend beyond a physical 'place', reflecting instead an idea or vision of home that is neither solely territorial nor spatial. With this in mind, international organizations and peacebuilding actors are called to carefully align refugee return programs with a holistic peace approach. Refugees' preferences, along with their movements back and forth between Lebanon and Syria, challenge the conventional approach that frames return as a product of push or pull factors from the host to the origin destination.

In this article, I advocated for a perspective that treats return policymaking as relational and interdependent—embedded in what Thania Paffenholz characterizes as a perpetual peacebuilding project. Peacebuilders developing repatriation programs must consider the interconnected impacts of conflict, crises, economies and regime change. Their interventions should be sequenced to reflect how these forces intersect across borders and over the *longue durée* in non-linear ways. Refugees' social capital, the toll of violence they have endured, and their access to livelihoods and employment far exceed a linear calculation of return prospects from point A to point B.

Further reading

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